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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001515

SIPDIS
HQ SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
TREASURY FOR MKACZMAREK
NSC FOR DRESTREPO
NSC FOR LROSSELLO
USDOC FOR 4332 MAC/ITA/WH/JLAO
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PASS TO AMCONSUL QUEBEC
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/01

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SUBJECT: CARACAS STRUGGLES TO TAKE OUT THE TRASH

CLASSIFIED BY: DUDDY, AMBASSADOR, DOS, AMB; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On November 26, Caracas residents blocked a major highway with burning tires to protest the growing piles of trash that had accumulated along the streets of the Libertador municipality. Despite an earlier promise by Libertador Mayor Jorge Rodriguez to resolve the crisis by November 25, the increase in garbage before the holiday season and the deterioration of one of the principal trash processing facilities caused ongoing delays in garbage collection, raising public health concerns and producing an overpowering stench that slowly within the city. City officials blamed insufficient fees for trash collection, an aging fleet of garbage trucks, and an apathetic workforce for the delays. Meanwhile, representatives from opposition-led districts of Caracas claimed that the Venezuelan government (GBRV) has purposely denied opposition areas access to trash collection services. END SUMMARY.

THE SWEET SMELL OF GOVERNMENT INEFFICIENCY

¶2. (SBU) On November 26, residents of the Libertador municipality in Caracas blocked the Panamerican highway with burning tires to protest the accumulation of trash in their neighborhood (Note: Caracas is divided into five municipalities. Sixty percent of the population lives in the Chavista-led Libertador municipality; the other four municipalities are all headed by opposition mayors. End note.) According to press reports, the protest paralyzed traffic in both directions, creating an eight kilometer long traffic jam, until two garbage trucks from the Libertador Mayor's Office arrived to clear the debris from the highway. Two days earlier, on November 24, Libertador Mayor Jorge Rodriguez had created a special committee to address the issue after blaming a private collection company and increasing consumption in advance of the holidays for the delays.

¶3. (C) For much of November, delays in garbage collection left heaps of trash along the streets of Libertador. In response, concerned residents mobilized to protest the nauseating smell and the potential effects on public health. According to a report by the Center of Economic Investigations (CIECA), the deterioration of the Las Mayas garbage processing plant, the primary collection point for garbage in Libertador and much of Caracas, is a principal cause for the delays in processing trash. The Las Mayas plant, located in Libertador, compacts the city's garbage before it is transported to a larger landfill outside of Caracas. The CIECA report estimates that the plant's capacity has declined from 7,500 tons of trash per day in 2006 to around 2,520 tons in 2008 due to repeated equipment failures. Newspaper photos of Las Mayas show piles of unprocessed trash many meters high. Since 2005, officials

from both the national and local government have repeatedly announced plans for large-scale investment in Las Mayas--totaling some USD 88.3 million in commitments--but there has been little evidence of improvement or even maintenance of the plant, fuelling speculation that much of the money was diverted by corrupt officials or never appropriated.

GARBAGE TRUCK DRIVERS GONE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

¶4. (C) In addition to the collapse of Las Mayas, many of the garbage trucks serving Caracas have broken down, causing further delays in trash collection. An employee for Proactiva, the private contractor hired to collect trash in Libertador, told the press that more than 50 percent of the collection vehicles are currently inoperable. Replacement parts are costly due to difficulties in acquiring foreign exchange through the GBRV's Foreign Exchange Administration Board (CADIVI). There is also a shortage of drivers for the few garbage trucks that are still operable. Cruz Manuel Garrido, the Director of Human Resources for Proactiva, told the press that 70 percent of the company's employees failed to show up for work after they received their traditional Christmas bonuses.

GBRV WON'T TAKE OUT THE OPPOSITION'S TRASH

¶5. (C) Gerardo Blyde, the opposition mayor of the Baruta municipality of Caracas, told a leading daily on November 25 that the trash collection crisis is a structural problem: the fees for trash collection are established by the national government and published in the Official Gazette, but they have not been increased

CARACAS 00001515 002 OF 002

in years. Consequently, residents pay a minimal fee that does not cover the costs of the service.

¶6. (C) On June 5, Baruta Director General Carmen Elisa Hernandez (protect throughout) told EmbOffs that the municipality's collection vehicles had been denied further access to the Las Mayas plant, forcing the municipality to transport garbage to a dump outside the city. The trucks now spend more time driving to and from the dump and less time collecting the municipality's trash. Hernandez speculated that the decision to cut off the municipality's access to Las Mayas was politically motivated because Baruta has an opposition mayor. On October 5, the Public Relations Director for the Sucre municipality, Andrea Serrano (protect throughout), said that opposition Mayor Carlos Ocariz inherited just two garbage containers from his pro-Chavez predecessor. "I'm sure there used to be more, but they took them away so that we would have problems," Serrano said.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) An increase in consumption in the ramp up to the holiday season may be partly responsible for the trash collection crisis. Regardless of the cause of the crisis, the government's failure to regularly take out the trash, or provide an adequate fee structure to pay for the service, is widely seen as another example of the deteriorating basic infrastructure in Caracas. To the extent that the gradual erosion of infrastructure forces the GBRV to choose who should continue to receive these services, and who should not, the opposition areas are likely to be the first left out.

DUDDY